DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 473 UD 031 710

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TITLE The Illusion of Racial Diversity in Contemporary Basal Readers: An Analysis of the Teacher Manuals.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basal Reading; Children; *Childrens Literature; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; Intermediate Grades; *Racial Differences; *Reading Materials; Teaching Guides; *Textbook Content

ABSTRACT

Basal reading programs not only have tremendous impact on children's learning to read, but they subtly influence children's attitudes toward and understanding of racial differences in society. In this study, teacher manuals from four basal reading programs were examined for grades four, five, and six to learn how ideas for discussing racial and cultural differences with children are presented. The readers and manuals studied were published by: (1) Harcourt Brace (1995); (2) Houghton Mifflin (1993); (3) MacMillan (1993); and (4) Silver Burdett and Ginn (1991). The results of the text analysis indicate that basal manuals avoid discussions of racial and cultural differences even when those topics are found in the reading selections. The omission of race and culture from the basal selections and their teacher manuals creates the illusion that race does not matter, when it clearly does to many children and their families. Implications for teacher education and schools serving children of color are discussed. (Contains 2 tables and 22 references.) (Author/SLD)

The Illusion of Racial Diversity in Contemporary Basal Readers: An Analysis of the Teacher Manuals

Paper to be Presented an the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association, March 24-28, 1997
Chicago, Illinois

by

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Abstract

Basal reading programs not only have tremendous impact on children's learning to read, but they subtly influence children's attitudes toward and understanding of racial differences in society. In this study we examined teacher manuals from four basal reading programs (at grades 4, 5, and 6) to learn how ideas for discussing racial and cultural differences with children are presented. The results of our text analyses indicate that basal manuals avoided discussions of racial and cultural differences even when those topics were found in the reading selections. The omission of race and culture from the basal selections and their teacher manuals creates the illusion that race does not matter, when it clearly does to many children and their families. Implications for teacher education and schools serving children of color are discussed.

Introduction and Purpose

These are challenging times for children. Economic demands on families, rapidly changing technologies, and increasing standards in literacy education are forces that are dramatically changing children's lives. Moreover, in today's multicultural world children must learn to effectively use literacy and language to communicate and understand people from many different races, ethnicities, and heritages.

In this study we examined teacher manuals in elementary reading programs to learn how ideas for discussing racial differences with children are presented. The study rested on our assumption that basal reading programs not only have tremendous impact on children's learning to read, but they subtly influence children's attitudes toward and understanding of racial differences in society. We anticipated that the basal textbooks would contain many selections with people of color. This we thought to be especially true given the changing racial demographics of our country and the recognized importance of integrating multicultural issues into elementary curricula. Consequently, we further expected that the basal manuals would offer teachers many ideas for improving their children's understanding of racial difference.

We examined contemporary basal reader manuals to learn the kinds

of instructional recommendations they contain for teachers when discussing stories about people of color. Specifically, we examined the following questions:

- What instructional recommendations do basal reader manuals offer to teachers when discussing reading selections containing people of color?
- What are the implications of these findings for teacher educators as they prepare new teachers for racially diverse classrooms?

Review of Related Literature

Basal reader programs are widely used in most elementary classrooms (Hoffman, 1994). This remains so even after a decade of spirited advocacy for whole language and literature-based instruction (Goodman, 1988; Goodman,1989; Weaver, 1994), and widespread as well as long-term dissatisfaction with the kinds of stories contained in basal readers (Reutzel and Larsen, 1995; Taxel, 1979). Although contemporary basals contain more stories portraying racial, cultural, and economic diversity than readers of years ago, we have wondered what kind of instructional recommendations are offered in the instructors' manuals for helping teachers discuss these issues with children.

A number of researchers have examined the usefulness of the

instructional recommendations in basal manuals. Durkin (1984) found that manuals are unsystematic in their recommendations to teachers, offering too much advice where little is needed, or no advice when information would be helpful (Durkin, 1984). Similarly, Miller and Blumenfeld (1993) criticized basal manuals because their practice activities do not foster student comprehension of complex texts.

Other researchers have studied the impact basal manuals have on teacher decision-making. Barr and Sadow (1989) argued that teachers indiscriminately select activities from basal manuals keeping children busy at their seats, regardless of the learning tasks' importance in learning to read. Barksdale & Ladd (1993) discovered that teachers reluctantly depended on basal reader manuals to satisfy classroom needs for skill instruction, grouping, and lesson pacing. And the most far reaching criticism is Shannon's (1987) who claims that basals "deskill" teachers, because they blindly follow basal manuals instead of constructing lessons to fit the literacy needs of their students.

At least one research study questions the findings of teacher reliance on basal manuals. Sosniak & Stodolsky (1993) argue that basal manuals have less influence on teachers' decision-making than others suggest. They have found that teachers vary in how they use manuals from

one lesson to the next, sometimes disregarding the manuals' recommendations by developing their own directed reading lessons.

Method

Four basal reader series were used in this analysis of teacher manuals. All four, Harcourt Brace (1995), Houghton Mifflin (1993), MacMillan (1993), and Silver Burdett and Ginn (1991) have recently been published and are widely used throughout the Capital District of New York State. Originally we intended to examine primary grade texts but learned that readers at those levels contained more fable and folk literature about animals and far fewer stories where persons were the protagonists. Consequently, we focused our research on fourth, fifth, and sixth grade level readers.

Procedures

We began the study by examining each of the basal reader manuals to identify stories that depicted people of color in their texts or illustrations. Each selection with persons of color was categorized according to racial and ethnic group depicted, its literary genre, and whether race or culture was mentioned and used in the manuals' suggestions to teachers for classroom learning activities. Selections pertaining to African Americans, Asian, and Latino people were found in

all the basal manuals. We also counted selections about Native Americans and the Jewish diaspora as examples of minority literature; Number the Stars by Lowry (1989), for example, as well as European folktales depicting Jewish heritage (e.g., "When Schlemiel Went to Warsaw" by Isaac Singer) were included in our analyses.

We only analyzed major stories in the basals and did not include one-page anecdotes, poetry, or other supplemental texts which the basals frequently contained. Harcourt & Brace and the MacMillan series for example, contained one and two page segments, called "Multicultural Perspectives" and "Multicultural Connections," that were ancillary to the full basal stories. We reasoned that because these supplemental texts were not integrated into the directions for the full guided reading lessons, it would be less likely teachers would regularly use them in their instruction. Consequently, we did not include them in this analysis.

Two researchers examined the basal manuals and cross-checked their analyses to assure consistency of findings. We categorized story character's race as Caucasian, African or African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian/Pacific. We did not use a biracial category although some of the illustrations might have been persons of mixed backgrounds. We used the term ethnicity to refer to cultural differences among people

of the same race. For example, we identified story characters as Asian when their ethnicity might be Vietnamese, Korean, or Japanese.

In some cases we had knowledge of an original chapter book that was included in a basal, and in these cases we categorized the basal story according to the original book. Maniac Magee (Spinelli, 1990), is an example of this. In the original story, Maniac, who is white, interacted with many African American friends, but Harcourt and Brace selected an incidental chapter about rope tieing, where all story characters were white. That particular episode, we believed, would falsely distort children's understanding of the original story's theme and problem of homelessness and the importance of constructing friendships across racial boundaries.

After identifying a selection with a person of color, we examined each manual by asking ourselves if the character's race or culture was mentioned in the directions to teachers, and whether race and culture were discussed in a substantive way. Typically, the basal manuals offered teachers sample comprehension questions for improving children's understanding of the selection, so we looked primarily for questions pertaining to the race and culture of the characters when the selections contained people of color. Sometimes the manuals would present

discussion ideas for understanding the cultural backgrounds of the selection's characters, and we included that as evidence that race and/or culture was being discussed.

Results

The basal reading manuals differed greatly in their treatment of racial diversity. Some basals contained far more stories with people of color than others. The basals also differed between grade levels within the same series in the number of selections with people of color. In addition, the teacher manuals varied in the frequency in which they presented teaching ideas about race and culture. Text genre also influenced whether the teacher manuals addressed racial differences, with biographical selections containing more ideas than other genres. More stories with African Americans appeared than any other group, and the Holocaust was almost not presented at all.

Some basals are far better at portraying the diversity of our racial and cultural landscape than others. Specifically, there is a great difference in the number of stories containing people of color from one basal series to the next. For example, the Houghton Mifflin series contained 16 stories with people of color for grades 4, 5, and 6, but MacMillan presented more than twice as many stories with people of color

(N=35) at those same grade levels. Table I illustrates the number of selections containing people of color at each grade level from each of the basal series.

Table I: Number of Stories with People of Color in Each Basal Series

	Harcourt Brace	Houghton Mifflin	Macmillan	Silver Burdett and Ginn
Grade 4	10	5	12	8
Grade 5	6	6	6	14
Grade 6	12	5	17	*

* Not analyzed at the time of this draft

There was a difference at the point during the academic year in which a child would first encounter a story character of color. In some of the basal selections people of color appeared in the very beginning of the reader. But in others, a character of color would not be seen until almost the middle of the school year as Harcourt Brace does with its sixth grade reader.

Ideas for discussing race and culture of story characters appeared less than half (46%) of the time in which people of color appeared in the basal selections. In other words, the instructional recommendations to teachers were color neutral much of the time. Specifically, we identified a total of 101 stories containing people of color but only 46 of the manuals' lesson plans offered ideas for discussing race or culture. Table 2

illustrates our findings about the frequency of these teaching ideas.

Table 2: Frequency of Teaching Ideas about Race or Color appearing in Teacher Manuals*

	Harcourt Brace	Houghton Mifflin	MacMillan	Silver Burdett and Ginn
Grade 4	3/10	1/5	9/12	0/8
Grade 5	1/6	1/6	3/6	10/14
Grade 6	5/12	2/5	11/17	**

* Fractional numbers indicate the number of stories where color is discussed above the total number of stories containing people of color

** Analysis not completed at the time of this draft

Table 2 indicates that there was wide variability in the treatment of color and culture among the basal reading series. For example, Houghton Mifflin contained the fewest stories (16) with people of color and only four of those lessons (25%) contained teaching ideas for discussing diversity with children. Yet MacMillan contained three times (N=35) as many stories with people of color in its basals, and it offered teaching ideas about race or culture two thirds of the time.

Text genre influenced the likelihood that a manual would offer teaching ideas for discussing racial diversity. We found ten biographical stories in the four basal series, and all but one offered teaching ideas for discussing race and culture with children. Some of the teaching ideas found in biographical selections were quite good. For example, in

"Teammates," Macmillan's 4th grade manual offered specific ideas for discussing race; the manual identified the vocabulary items of racial prejudice and segregation as concepts to be taught. The manual offered discussion ideas for asking children who they would feel if they were discriminated in some way. The Macmillan manual also presented extension ideas for students to learn about Jesse Owen and Luz Long, two athletes who suffered from racial discrimination.

The biographical selections frequently contained good teaching ideas about race and culture. For instance, in "To Live in Two Worlds," a selection found in Macmillan's 6th grader, the manual contained rich information about the cultural lives of Navajo people. The manual listed many of the Navajo beliefs, and it recommended that teachers help children learn historical and societal issues influencing contemporary Navajo people.

More people of color appeared in realistic fiction than any other genre (N=45), and 17 of those lessons offered ideas for discussing race or culture. Folktales and legends ranked second in frequency (N=25) with selections containing people of color, and in two thirds of these lessons the manuals offered teaching ideas about diversity.

These manuals presented the world from the brightest of

perspectives even when the stories contained the saddest of moments. This distortion is evidenced in many of their immigrant stories. Typically the immigrant stories depicted America as a warm and accepting country. But we know this was and remains not always true for immigrants of color. For example, prejudice and bigotry are portrayed in Mohr's (1979) original book, Felita. Felita, a Puerto Rican girl, and her family move from one New York City neighborhood to a nicer one after the father obtains a better paying job. However, in their new neighborhood they are faced with racial and cultural prejudice. MacMillan's selection from that chapter book, which is used in its fourth grade reader, does not contain the same issue of prejudice. Its manual avoids that issue and suggests, "Discuss what adjustments might have been hard for Felita's older family members and what they might do to keep their Puerto Rican memories and heritage alive" (MacMillan manual, p. 205). Similarly, in Harcourt & Brace's sixth grade story, "Hello, My Name is Scrambled Eggs," ideas for discussing cultural differences facing new Asian immigrants are presented, but bigotry and racism are not. And the same omission of prejudice appears in Harcourt & Brace's instructional recommendations for the sixth grade story, "The Vietnamese in America." A steady diet of these stories would lead readers to assume that intolerance and bigotry do not exist in

America.

The basal reading programs euphemized the human experience by avoiding story episodes containing racial discord. Macmillan's 6th grade reader, for example, contained an episode from Maniac Magee (Spinelli, 1992) pertaining to conflict between the stories central characters; but the central theme of the original text was one of homelessness and people constructing friendships across racial boundaries -- Macmillan's basal avoided race as a point for discussion. The tendency to brighten the dark side of human nature appeared in all four basal series and in many of their stories.

Another example of how tragic human events are trivialized in the basals is from Harcourt Brace's reader. As Jewish families hid from the Nazis in Lowry's (1989) Number the Stars, the Harcourt and Brace sixth grade manual suggested that children "...read to find out how Anne Marie and her family and friends cope with the hardships of wartime (Harcourt Brace, teacher manual, p. 262)." This is a gross understatement to refer to the holocaust as a "wartime hardship" when an entire people was being deliberately extinguished.

Finally, we analyzed the basal series according to frequency in which particular racial groups appeared. African American appeared in

more selections than others (N=38). Latinos (N=22) and Native Americans (N=20) were second and third in frequency of appearance. Asian and Americans appeared fourth in rank, with 17 selections. Only four of the selections depicted Jewish heritage in these basal programs.

Discussion

Basal reading programs are known to present conservative and status quo positions about reading education (Hoffman et al, 1994), and our study confirms that finding. Our study confirms that conservativeness and further indicates that racial and cultural differences are not depicted in basal readers. More often than not, basal manuals avoid discussions of racial difference -- the publishers selected more harmonious story episodes even when the original texts presented themes of racial alienation, discord, or prejudice. Furthermore these basal manuals offered teachers few discussion ideas about race and culture even when those topics were found in their reading selections. In effect, the omission of race from the basal selections and teacher manuals creates the illusion that race does not matter.

We also found great variability in the number of reading selections containing people of color in these basal reading programs. Some of the basals contained twice as many selections with people of color than

others. Macmillan's basal series contained twice as many selections with people of color than Houghton Mifflin and 1/3 more than Harcourt and Brace. Basals also differed between grade levels in the number of reading selections containing people of color. That is the basals varied from one grade level to the next in the number of stories containing racial diversity.

The infrequency in which the basal selections contained people of color is significant for helping children learn to read. Given what we know about the positive effects of prior knowledge (Anderson & Pearson, 1984) and interest and motivation in understanding texts (Anderson, Shirley, Wilson & Fielding, 1987) these basals will make learning more difficult for some children. Frankly stated, many children of color will have difficulty using their schemata to understand these basal texts, and they will have problems identifying with their story characters.

There is a tendency to avoid discussions of racial difference in public settings. For example, a recent study by Jervis (1996) describes how at an alternate New York City school, with exceptional faculty dedicated to racial and social equity, classroom discussions about racial difference and discord were avoided. When conflict occurred among children, and racial differences appeared to underlie an incident, teachers

overlooked and circumvented the issue, even when children requested that race be discussed.

Some would argue that race matters with children and their families. And it matters far more than is evidenced in our daily conversations or classroom lessons. A kindergarten parent in Vivian Paley's school explained the issue this way: "My children are black. They don't look like your children. They know they're black and we want it recognized. It's a positive difference. At least it could be so, if you teachers learned to value differences more. What you value, you talk about (Paley, 1979, p. 138)."

There are many implications to be drawn from our analyses. School districts should understand that basal series differ greatly in their treatment of racial and cultural diversity. If school districts desire large numbers of stories with children of color, they need to look closely because basal reader programs differ in this regard. In fact, in our opinion school districts should look elsewhere because stories with racial diversity are infrequently found in these basal programs.

Our findings have implications for teaching children about racial and cultural diversity. We believe that children need to learn at a young age to respect and value racial and cultural differences. Yet these basal readers

will have little influence on children's understanding about racial diversity because the stories rarely contained people of color, and nearly half of that time the manuals offered few teaching ideas for learning about diversity.

Elementary teachers must develop a rich knowledge of children's literature. This is especially true for teachers who work with African American, Latino, and Asian children; these children's life experiences are not represented in these basal reading programs. Consequently, classroom teachers must learn to locate and use literature depicting children's social and cultural backgrounds, and teachers must learn to do so independently of the commercial reading programs. Furthermore, teacher educators must help prospective teachers acquire a rich knowledge of children's literature as well as help them develop resources for broadening their understanding of literature throughout their careers. Encouraging memberships and participation in professional organizations such as the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English would help new teachers in this area of knowledge.

We know it is not easy talking about racial and cultural differences. In fact, discussions about racial differences cause discomfort for most adults. One way racial differences can be discussed is through models of

critical pedagogy (Kanpol, 1995; Shannon, 1996). A pedagogy that fosters children's critical thinking would be an important contribution to school and social reform.

Critics of our study might argue that classroom discussions about race should occur during social studies and not during reading time. That reasoning, we believe, is incorrect because: 1) Most classrooms are now integrating their instruction of the elementary subjects, and it is as likely for teachers to discuss social issues in reading and math as it is during social studies; 2) The heart of good literature is often the most controversial and awkward of topics. Eliminating discussions of race and culture from reading time is akin to homogenizing all cheeses so they all taste the same with nothing unique for our palates. More directly stated, children need to learn strategies for talking about racial diversity.

Spirit and passion of story are frequently embodied in the culture and race of protagonists. These topics can be effectively discussed with children. Denying racial difference or conflict is an ill-conceived approach to literacy and elementary education. Our multiracial society is in desperate need of a population that can critically read and sensitively discuss these social issues -- basal reading programs and their manuals do not move us forward in this regard.

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